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ABSTRACT

An instructional plan to rescue at-risk students must be based on a curriculum intended to serve all students. The creation of a functional curriculum, the promotion of employability skills, and an emphasis on improving study skills are instructional patterns that seem to be effective in reducing the number of student dropouts. Two alternatives that have proved effective in reorienting potential dropouts are peer tutoring and cooperative learning. Other elements that can help reduce dropouts are student support services and cooperative planning among agencies. At-risk students require the most positive learning climate a school can possibly maintain. School systems must provide skilled and knowledgeable professionals to work with at-risk young people. Cited as examples of successful programs are the following: (1) "Employment Skills Program and Designated Vocational Education," Verona, Wisconsin; (2) "Vocational Entry/Exit-Level Skills Project," Camden, Missouri; (3) "Special Needs Transition Program," Chaska, Minnesota; (4) "Project Strive," Rockaway, New Jersey; (5) "Southeast Oakland Vocational Center Project," Royal Oak, Michigan; and (6) Frederick County Vocational Evaluation/Support Team," Frederick, Maryland. (MLF)

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Instructional Alternatives: Rescue Strategies For At-Risk Students

Current national estimates predict that, on the average, no more than three out of four of today's fifth graders will graduate from high school in 1997, and that in many localities, especially our inner cities, that figure may be strikingly lower.

Unfortunately, no secondary school is without its dropouts and other students who are likely to leave school prematurely—those now commonly labeled as at-risk pupils. Admittedly, much is being said and written these days about coping with this situation and what might be done, in school and out, to improve the holding power of our secondary schools.

Nonetheless, a summary of how schools can serve at-risk students should help administrators and their associates as they work to deter students from becoming dropout statistics.

One of the difficulties educators face in trying to save possible dropouts is identifying them before they drop out. Educators should study their own school's history in this regard, but may benefit by looking at dropout populations on a wider screen.

Here, then, are a few national statistics.

A 1983 report by the National Center for Education Statistics listed the reasons given by young people who had dropped out of school and the percentage of each:

- School not for them.....33.1 percent
- Poor grades.....33.0
- Offered job or chose to work.....19.0
- Marriage.....17.8
- Didn't get along with teachers.....15.5
- Had to support family.....11.1
- Pregnancy.....10.9

Taking into account that these are student-reported reasons, it still is evident that a poor fit of school and student was most often involved in these decisions to leave school. Low grades, a year or more behind grade level, negative school attitudes, and a history of delinquent behavior are noted in the school records of many dropouts.

Important factors not related to academic success also significantly influence chances for such success. NASSP Executive Director Timothy Dyer, speaking last fall as superintendent of the Phoenix (Ariz.) Union High School District, said:

> The day-to-day life of kids in the inner city exacts an incredible toll on their mental well-being. This makes it difficult for a kid to concentrate on school or even care about going to school. Their main concern is just surviving on a daily basis. We have to get them a lot younger and provide them with the support they are going to need if they are going to make it academically.

To quote further from an OpEd article in the November 19, 1989, *Boston Globe*:

> Dropout programs that focus solely on high schools are often a failure because by the time students reach ninth grade they have often decided whether to stay in school. . . . To many ninth graders, especially those

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attending school in depressed city neighborhoods, tests and homework are often the last things on their minds. They must contend with poverty, resist the temptation of drug dealers and deal with broken families.

Staying in school to graduate will not by itself guarantee a happy and successful life, but leaving early makes achieving success difficult. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1985, 25 percent of high school dropouts ages 16-24 were unemployed, compared with only 10 percent of the graduates.

Those at-risk youth who drop out and find employment earn lower salaries and are more likely to hold semi-skilled and manual labor jobs. The mean income for men and women 25 years of age and older who did not complete high school is about one-third lower than those who completed high school. Furthermore, dropouts are 6 to 10 times more likely to be involved in criminal activities than are graduates.

All Students Benefit

By itself, such information is unlikely to persuade many potential dropouts to stay in school. And schools, no matter their intentions and skills, are not likely to be able to do much, by themselves, to ameliorate or eliminate the economic and social conditions with which so many dropouts must try to cope, both before and after they leave school.

Where does this leave schools and school systems as they try to help *all* young people to live better lives today and to prepare to live fuller lives in the years ahead? Whatever a school or school system may do to aid at-risk students will also help all other members of the student body, and vice versa.

Such recommendations as more parent contacts, individualized programs, alternate learning settings and instructional plans, links with the business community, higher expectations for student performance and achievement, comprehensive daily attendance check-ups, and more opportunities to obtain locally applicable occupational preparation, are similar to recommendations curriculum leaders push for the total curriculum. Although some specialized programs are needed to salvage at-risk youth, to be successful, an instructional plan to rescue such students must be based on a curriculum intended to serve *all* students.

Never Too Soon or Too Late

People often assume that dropping out is exclusively a high school problem. For instance, published statistics commonly focus on how many of the current ninth grade students will drop out before graduation.

True, the largest number of dropouts will leave during the high school years, but primarily because that is when they can easily do it. But the bases for such a decision have been laid in the lives of most dropouts some years before.

Educators must be alert to the early signs of the at-risk syndrome among adolescents, and intervene as soon as possible. This implies, too, the importance of consistent and comprehensive information sharing about students as they move from school level to school level. Marking a youngster as a probable dropout so early in his or her academic career may increase the likelihood of his or her being among the missing some day, but educators sensitive to the nature and needs of adolescents can minimize such stereotyping.

Although it is important for middle grades teachers and administrators to take a more responsible attitude toward their roles in reducing student dropouts, this must not reduce or obscure the responsibilities of the staffs of senior high schools in trying to salvage potential failures. For most students, it's never too late.

An Effective Rescue Plan

At-risk youngsters are salvaged one by one, but the basis for such individual rescue operations must be programs and services that are more useful and persuasive than customary school content and procedures. A few characteristics of instructional patterns seem to be effective in reducing the number of student dropouts.

■ *Create a Functional Curriculum.* At-risk students frequently do not see the relevance of their school's curriculum to their out-of-school lives. Linking skills and competencies taught in the classroom to those used in the outside world does increase motivation for many young people.

A "functional curriculum" refers to teaching basic skills and attitudes by utilizing the community setting, community personnel, field trips, and problem-solving activities designed specifically to ready at-risk students to be self-sufficient young adults at whatever point they choose or are forced to cut their formal school connections. Vocational education, for example, is a natural setting for a functional curriculum, since its basic goal is to prepare students for the labor force and for the demands of independent living.

A more specific example of a functional curriculum design that can be used with all students is Life-Centered Career Education (LCCE). This curriculum has three principal areas: Daily Living Skills, Personal-Social Skills, and Occupational Guidance and Preparation Skills. The program identifies 22 competencies, which are refined into 97 subcompetencies.

Materials about LCCE are available from the Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 22091.

■ *Promote Employability Skills.* "Employability skills" are those essential cognitive and affective abilities that

are necessary for successful transition from school to work and beyond. These skills are essential for job seeking, job placement, and job retention, and cover the following areas:

- *Socialization skills*, which are designed to help young people more effectively manage their relationships with their peers, parents, teachers, and employers
- *Communication skills*, to help students improve their use of oral and written language
- *Financial management skills*, to assist learners in managing their personal finances and establishing a better understanding of everyday money matters
- *Values clarification abilities*, to aid young people in examining the values they hold while they begin to develop those values more widely held by society
- *Job procurement and retention skills*, which assist learners in seeking and holding employment when the time comes to enter the world of work.

All students, not just at-risk youth, should be involved in learning experiences that will help them improve their command of these skills, but that opportunity is especially relevant for young people whose school tenure seems uncertain.

Such learning experiences should be initiated in the middle school years rather than deferred until sometime during the senior high school—when such "consumer education" programs frequently are offered.

■ *Emphasize improving study skills.* Helping students acquire adequate study skills should be an integral part of the functional curriculum. In fact, study skills might be included among the employability skills listed earlier because learning of some form is usually required for even entry-level success.

Counselors, teachers, vocational educators, and resource personnel must work together to structure in-school and out-of-school learning experiences to enhance vocational readiness skills for all students, but especially for those students who are at risk.

Instructional Alternatives

Changes in the substance of instruction and the settings in which that instruction is provided can persuade at-risk students to stay in school. Educators who are striving to get a firmer hold on their at-risk youngsters will certainly use a variety of techniques that depart from the customary.

Two alternatives that have proved effective in reorienting potential dropouts are peer tutoring and cooperative learning.

1. Peer Tutoring. This is a technique in which at-risk students are teamed one-on-one or in very small groups with other students. Research indicates that at-risk young people who are involved in well-planned and supervised peer tutoring situations show:

- Gains in their grade-point averages
- Improvement in reading, math, writing, communication, and study skills
- Increases in reading comprehension levels
- Improvement in their ability to identify long-range goals
- Gains in self-confidence and in interpersonal skills.

There is, of course, more to establishing a productive peer tutoring program than merely putting a couple of students at a table and telling them to go at it. A few prerequisites for a successful program are:

- Program philosophy and policies
- Criteria for selecting tutors
- Criteria for selecting students to be tutored
- Role and limitations of tutors
- A process for matching students and tutors
- Tutor-training sessions
- Supervision of tutors on an ongoing basis
- Community awareness about the program
- Parental awareness that their students are involved
- Evaluation of the program's effectiveness as a whole and for individual participants.

2. Cooperative Learning. The essence of cooperative learning is developing and assigning a group goal to a team of students and then rewarding the entire group on the basis of their work according to preset expectations or standards. That is, individuals are rewarded or graded on the basis of the total group's performance or achievement.

Cooperative learning allows for more direct face-to-face interaction among students, provides healthy peer pressure for achievement and appropriate classroom behavior, and creates a higher level of trust among students.

Cooperative learning is especially beneficial for heterogeneous student populations because it promotes liking and learning among young people of varying academic abilities and backgrounds and improves student motivation, subject matter mastery, social development, and student self-esteem.

The teacher's responsibilities in a cooperative learning context include:

- Selecting the most appropriate group size for lesson or project
- Selecting students for each learning cluster
- Arranging the classroom so that clusters will not interfere with other's activities and learning
- Explaining the task to be undertaken and the goal structure to students
- Providing appropriate directions, materials, supplies, and equipment
- Observing student-to-student reactions and intervening as needed as a consultant or monitor
- Evaluating group products using established criteria.

These may seem to be merely extensions of teachers' traditional classroom duties, but they are more than that,

and teachers do need some inservice training to help them effectively use cooperative learning teaching with their students.

Cooperation for Success

Student Support Services. Curriculum revision and new instructional approaches are not enough; without support services, many at-risk students will drop out. Essential components of such support services are personal concern by at least one adult, and a high degree of involvement to establish trust and build rapport with the at-risk student.

An excellent analysis of what schools can do to strengthen their student support services is found in a new Massachusetts Department of Education handbook titled *Changing Schools and Communities: A Systemic Approach to Dropout Prevention*, which is worth quoting here:

> Possibly the most critical element to success [in reducing dropouts] within a school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Consequently, many schools have reorganized their guidance and counseling programs to provide students with increased support from adults. To provide increased support to students schools are encouraged to:
>
> - Devise guidance programs that evolve from the different developmental needs of students, are preventive as well as crisis oriented, and have an educational and a clinical focus
> - Create a case management system that includes a team of school and community staff who can assess the whole person and develop appropriate individual service plans
> - Develop mentor, teacher-adviser and life issues programs in order to increase supportive adult contact with students, and conduct periodic seminars for students, staff, and parents on pertinent issues such as drug and alcohol abuse or teen depression
> - Provide staff training on the developmental growth stages of students in the age group with which the staff works
> - Actively recruit dropouts to reenter school. Design an easy reentry process and place students in non-stigmatized programs
> - Provide "future opportunities" education and awareness to all students that includes career education and awareness, exposure to higher education, apprenticeship, and cooperative education programs, and work-study and job shadowing programs
> - Provide transitional support to students as they move from grade to grade, especially those who are moving to another school building (for example, visitations, orientations, "buddy" systems, and teacher-adviser programs).

This publication is available at no cost from Dan French, Dropout Prevention Specialist, Mass. Dept. of Ed., 1385 Hancock, Quincy, Mass. 02169.

Resource Personnel. Schools use a variety of models to provide support services for at-risk youth. These models may be psychologists, paraprofessional tutors, senior citizens, parents, or other adults with relevant personal occupational backgrounds. They can act as student advocates when the going gets rough for either the student or regular school personnel and often can "reach" an at-risk student when a teacher or guidance counselor cannot.

They can also help educate the community at large that young people who have left school or seem about to are not just lazy troublemakers.

Cooperative Planning Among Agencies. Many community agencies are available to help salvage at-risk youth. A cooperative planning and action approach at the local level can reduce duplication or gaps in services and can strengthen and make more comprehensive aid available.

Community service organizations, business and industry, the city or state department of social services, and various child and family services all can offer valuable staff and experience to schools. Responsible school personnel can take the lead in working out cooperative relationships with such groups on behalf of at-risk students and their parents.

Parental Involvement. Whether or not they are aware of it, parents contribute to the learning process of their children. The parents of some at-risk youth realize the part they can play in making school a worthwhile experience for them, but for one reason or another feel helpless to play a more active and influential role.

Guidance and other support personnel can spend more effort "tutoring" such parents in steps they can take to develop closer rapport with their youngsters and activities that will reinforce both the school's curriculum and their students' academic and social growth.

Some parents do care, or seem to, but may do more harm than good. Student rebellion in such settings may be a cry for help with family relationships. Here the cooperative programming with community agencies can pay off.

Some fathers and mothers just don't care. Perhaps this is the case with more students than we realize. If so, warm and skillful professional intervention is necessary. To have any chance of success, a rescue plan must include allocating substantial time and resources to rescue parents of threatened students, too.

Professional Development and Inservice Training. The issues and problems surrounding the at-risk population are numerous and complex; there are no easy answers. Skilled and knowledgeable professionals are required to meet the challenges. Schools and school systems must provide personnel who work with at-risk young people with developmental training opportunities in such areas as teaching strategies, positive discipline techniques, establishing cooperative learning versus competitive learning environments, group counseling procedures, and motivational techniques.

When reaching out to at-risk students, teachers must be at their best; they must feel good about themselves and their profession; and they must feel confident in their command of the latest knowledge in

their teaching field and about student development. They must be enthusiastic about their subject matter and about teaching and learning in general if they are to reach potential dropouts.

This leads to the essential and central role of strong administrative involvement in providing better programming and services for at-risk students. This involve-ment may range from seeking funding from private and governmental sources, to supporting faculty attendance at workshops and conferences, to arranging time in the schedule for special staff projects, to purchasing requested materials for teachers and students.

A Positive Learning Environment. The climate surrounding the educational enterprise frequently is the determining factor in whether a student stays in school or drops out. Climate is the feeling a student gets when sitting in the classroom, when meeting the principal or other staff member each morning, or when leaving school at the end of the day. It is the emotion stimulated by interactions with teachers and classmates.

Ultimately, the nature and quality of the school environment is what makes the curriculum the focus of a student's efforts or the distractor that erases the impact of the curriculum on the youngster. At-risk students require the most positive learning climate a school can possibly maintain.

Exempli Gratia

■ EMPLOYMENT SKILLS PROGRAM AND DESIGNATED VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, Verona High School, Verona, Wis. 53593. *Contact:* Joel Newcomb, coordinator.

The Employment Skills and Designated Vocational Educational programs focus attention on meeting the vocational, career, academic, and life skills needs of handicapped, disadvantaged, and other at-risk students.

Key features of the programs include career education experiences, enrollment and support of students in mainstream vocational education courses, and the successful completion of vocational course sequences including cooperative education.

The employment skills program is considered a preventive program. Employment skills courses include career awareness (9th grade), career exploration (10th grade), the world of work (11th grade), and career decisionmaking (12th grade). Other courses include independent study and on-the-job work experience in the 12th grade. All these are designed to provide students with career education and establish the importance of the relationship between school and work.

■ VOCATIONAL ENTRY/EXIT-LEVEL SKILLS PROJECT, Lake Area Vocational Technical School, Camden, Mo. 65020. *Contact*: Sharon Price.

This project focuses on providing career awareness for students in grades 6-10, as well as guidance and motivation for vocational training, transition to the world of work, and development of pre-vocational skills. Additional activities include vocational exploration and evaluation for all students and adjusted curriculum as well as one-on-one instruction in vocational training settings.

The staff for this program includes a vocational evaluator, a vocational resource teacher, and a vocational education aide. Personnel work closely with parents, vocational staff members, special education and regular program staff members, as well as members of the board of education.

■ SPECIAL NEEDS TRANSITION PROGRAM, Carver-Scott Cooperative Center, Chaska, Minn. 55318. *Contact:* Jeff Theis, special needs director.

The emphasis in this special needs program is on career exploration and pre-vocational orientation so students can develop a realistic understanding of the world of work. Remedial instruction and instruction in the basic skills related to vocational education is provided and special assistance is given students in making the transition from school to the world of work.

The curriculum focuses on basic skills, the improve-ment of self-concept, and career development through individualized instruction. Additional curriculum components include individual and family counseling, behavioral programming, on-the-job training contracts, job coaching, training in employability skills, and targeted job tax credit assistance to employers.

■ PROJECT STRIVE, Morris Knolls High School, Rockaway, N.J. 07866. *Contact:* David Lenox, project director.

The objective of Project Strive is to improve basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and to improve daily attendance and reduce the dropout rate. This is accomplished by providing academic and vocational support services through supplemental and remedial assistance.

Mentor job placement opportunities through cooperative programs are offered, along with individual and group counseling for students and parents. A flex school program provides supportive services for 10th grade students who are at high risk of dropping out. Students are enrolled in this program from late morning until 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. This special program is designed to provide students with a second or third chance for school success.

Another unique component is the shadow program, which provides work experience in community jobs for all students. Praise letters are sent quarterly to students for academic and vocational accomplishments as well as improvement in attendance and behavior patterns. There is also a certificate-of-award program that is

utilized to encourage and reward appropriate student behavior and accomplishment.

■ SOUTHEAST OAKLAND VOCATIONAL CENTER PROJECT, Southeast Oakland Vocational Education Center, Royal Oak, Mich. 48073. *Contact:* John Daenzer.

The program at Southeast Oakland Vocational Education Center provides an opportunity for special needs students to participate in any 1 of 22 vocational programs offered at the Center. Support services help students succeed in regular vocational education courses.

Key features of the program are the cooperative efforts of the sending school staff members and support services to help students learn technical reading, technical concepts, and terminology. Special emphasis is also placed on building students' self-esteem and cooperative attitudes, and establishing good work habits and punctuality.

Direct assistance to the students in the vocational education classroom is provided on a regular basis at the request of the classroom teacher, the sending school, or the student. Community agencies such as community mental health, family and child care services, and the Michigan Rehabilition Center are involved as needed. The center also maintains job placement and follow-up activities.

■ FREDERICK COUNTY VOCATIONAL EVALUATION/SUPPORT TEAM, Frederick County Board of Education, Frederick, Md. 21701. *Contact*: Lou Sachetti, director.

This program is designed to help handicapped and disadvantaged students select and successfully complete vocational training and provide students with career and vocational evaluation services. Students are assisted through individualized and small-group instruction.

Among the key features of the plan are hands-on vocational evaluation units and a county-wide network of vocational aides to assist students in vocational programs. A three-day vocational career evaluation workshop provides vocational program information to all 9th grade students.

Summing Up

The 1989 study, *Characteristics of At-Risk Youth*, presents a list of features that successful programs aimed at at-risk young people generally possess. The list summarizes well what we have said, and extends it a bit. The report says these programs:

- Are small in size and local in scope
- Are individualized around the needs of the school and its students
- Are characterized by caring and attentive staff members who are attuned to the personal needs of students
- Emphasize academic growth and develop and deliver a relevant curriculum that includes both academic and vocational components
- Include a faculty that establishes high expectations for its students and goals for student performance
- Establish strong links between school and family
- Often extend the traditional services provided by schools to meet the needs of the non-traditional family and the work schedules of adolescents
- Develop strong links between schools and businesses
- Develop a different climate from that which typifies many mainstream programs
- Give teachers autonomy over program planning, membership, and evaluation.

Kudos

This *Curriculum Report* was developed by Jerry L. Wircenski and Michelle D. Sarkees of the University of North Texas and Lynda L. West of George Washington University.

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